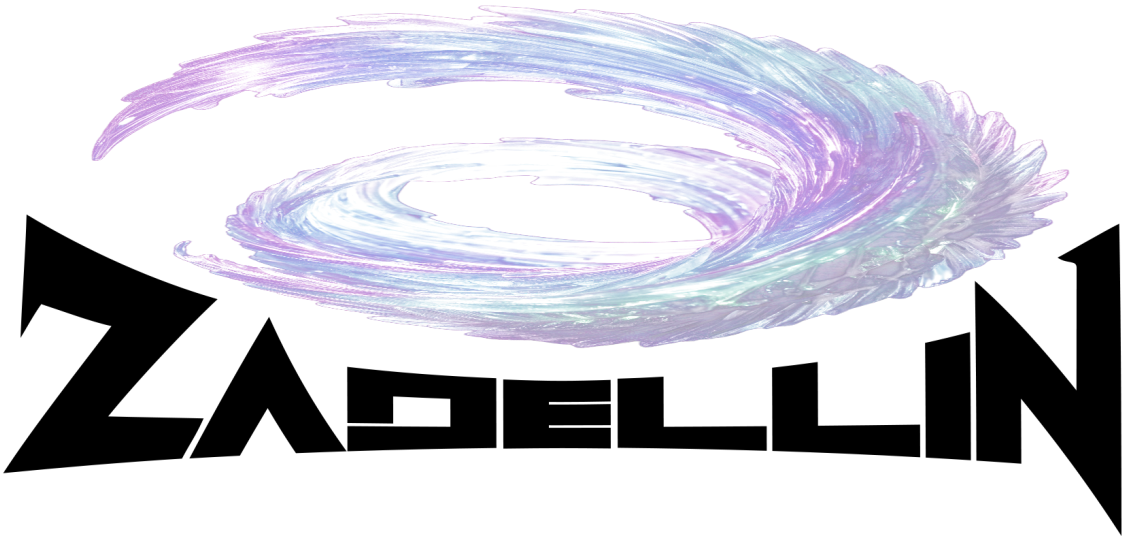

Market of the Uncanny

By Theta Mandel

Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

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1. *In a Spacecraft of Unsatisfactory Sophistication*

"Draven! Draven, come have a look at this!"

Correhnon called over kos shoulder at kos new partner, excited for the first time since the two had been paired a little over a week ago. Being partnered with an agent of the Department of Information was any Watcher's worst nightmare; being trapped in a metal box with one for days on end, ko was beginning to suspect, might prove to be the sort of experience that could drive even the most patient and well-trained operative of the Universe's oldest and wisest race to the depths of homicidal frenzy.

"What's the good news?" said the agent, striding over, and he came to a halt behind Correhnon's pilot-chair. His callow face was emblazoned with one of his trademark feckless smiles. "Don't tell me! You've finally removed that stick from up —"

"The scanner," Correhnon blurted out through gritted teeth, turning to face kos irritating partner. "It's picked up a signal. It wasn't in our sights for long — a few seconds — but long enough for rough identification. Draven, the machine says it was a Timeship."

"A Timeship?" The agent frowned mildly, as if Correhnon had pointed out a stain on his impeccable uniform jacket. "No patrols besides ours were authorised for this Quadrant," he recalled. "No registered time-active off-worlders, either." A gleam appeared in his eye as he thought aloud. "Why, that must mean — that must mean the Ship belongs to some lowlife — someone we can track and bring in! Probably stole the damn thing. Follow the trail! There's a commendation in this if we handle it right."

Correhnon rolled kos eyes. "I think you'll find I've already adjusted our course for interception. But don't get your hopes up — *we're* not flying a real space-time vessel. If they spot us and run, we can't follow. They could jump to another time zone, or even some region of space beyond our fuel range."

"Yes, I know!" retorted the agent, rolling his eyes in turn. "We have only the element of surprise — so go faster, will you!? This craft might be wildly suboptimal, but we're nowhere near the maximum —"

"Just a minute!" snapped Correhnon, flicking a series of switches. "I'm turning on our cloaking mechanism — we only have a shot as long as we remain undetected."

"You don't say!? Oh, do forgive me, oh wise and mighty Watcher of Providence! I would never have realised we needed to disguise our — *what was that?!*"

In a blink, Correhnon's attention shifted back to the navigational screen once more, but ko could only see a static projection of a starfield.

"What? What did you see?" ko prompted.

"The Ship's trace," said Draven, bravado abating for a moment. "For a moment, we had a fix on it, and then it just… vanished."

Correhnon's fingers moved over the keyboard as quickly as they could, trying to locate the Ship on the scanners.

"Nothing," ko sighed within moments, slumping back in kos seat. "They must have seen us and taken off."

"Seen us? But we're cloaked!" Draven protested, taking the news as a personal offense.

He, too, slumped down in his chair, drumming the fingers of his left hand on the arm rest, while the other went to his chin in what Correhnon found to be an unbearably artificial gesture.

"…Well, damn," Draven concluded importantly. "This Renegade must be the best of the best."

* * *

2. *Aboard the Timeship*

"Ahhhh!" screamed Nardeth, clinging on to the shaking control panel for dear life, their fingernails scraping unpleasantly against the metal. "What the Hell is happening??!"

"I have no clue. Just hold tight — argh!" Mrellin buckled over mid-sentence as another jolt hit the Ship, sending her crewmates flying.

Zerlan crashed against the far wall and began sliding down the hallway towards the main door as the Ship tilted this way and that, that way and this — *Zadellin* was shaking and groaning, walls pulsing as if she wasn't sure which way to turn, throwing levers to different positions in a fit of desperation, trying to protect her crew as she was buffeted by unseen winds.

There was a kind of desperate optimism in Zerlan's voice as ze cried out, zir back to the main door —

"I think she's landing!"

Ze was *almost* right.

* * *

3. Things - Part One

At first, there was nothing.

Nothing there.

Really, absolutely *nothing*.

And then, quite suddenly —

— there was rather a lot.

Such weight did not come easy to the fabric of reality; it buckled under the pressure, ripping slightly, wobbling as it tried to make sense of the vast amount of *stuff*, until it finally, precariously settled into a vaguely *real* form.

Taking cues from the victims of the cruel winds that had swallowed, chewed up, and spat back out some rather unrecognisable piles of cloth and bones and random tchotchkes, reality reassembled the nonsense into *something*… something found on any world, in any reality where there were people and the people had stuff and the stuff just didn't fit anymore. No point keeping it all, so…

But the storm was sweeping back around for the things it had dropped in its journey through the Turning.

The Turning, of course, was none other that swirling un-place where dimensions like Space and Time and Strawberries met and melded together, where everything was constantly changing and churning — that tunnel through the Fifth Dimension where reality itself was constantly broiling and rumbling and massing itself into great clouds of trouble and coincidence. The kind of clouds that would, if left unattended, become a storm…

* * *

4. Lightbringers On the Move

"Her scanners weren't registering anything before the storm knocked us off course — we won't know what we're heading towards until we get there. If the people will be friendly, or even if there *are* people." Mrellin peered ahead, squinting at the horizon. "But for what it's worth, I *think* those are man-made structures over there. Can you feel if there's activity?"

Nardeth let out a half-groan of exertion.

They'd been travelling with Mrellin and Zerlan for what felt like aeons; it had been a lifetime since they'd all quit that delicate and secretive employ through which they had first become acquainted. A literal lifetime, in Nardeth's case. They didn't regret that decision, nor the time spent with the pair since that fateful day; but they did wish that after all these years, their travelling companion might know better than to ask that kind of question.

"Not so good at that stuff," they reminded her after a moment. "Remember? My telepathy professor used to tell me I couldn't see the forest for the trees — I'm only good at the easy things, like fact-picking."

"Fact-picking?" repeated Mrellin, never one to stand for self-pity in a friend. "Oh, but that's so fiddly! It requires real skill. Certainly not what *I'd* call 'easy'!"

Nardeth shrugged, reaching up to adjust their collar. Mrellin narrowed her eyes, sensing the merest whiff of scepticism as to the earnestness of the compliment, but Nardeth batted away the mental tendril she'd sent out before she could make sure.

"How far do you think it is?"

They were slowing down again, breathing heavily.

Mrellin frowned. *Do you need a break?*

"I'm fine," Nardeth snapped — surprising themself at having caught that quite so readily. "Look, that has to be where Zerlan is — ze fell out while we were going over that area, I'm sure of it."

They walked faster, leaving Mrellin to catch up as best she could before she got left behind.

* * *

5. Blind Spots

If you are a human being, there is a part of your retina without any photoreceptive cells, meaning that light cannot be perceived by this part of your eye. The 'optic disc', it's called — that spot on your retina where the axons of the retinal ganglion cells converge to form your optic nerve, which is, of course, that wonderful, magical part of your anatomy that transmits the information collected by the cells in your eye to your brain, allowing you to see.

This means that, when you are looking straight ahead, there is a part of your field of vision you cannot actually perceive. And yet, somehow, you never notice. Try it. Look at something, right now. There is no dark spot, no absence of vision. Wonderfully, impossibly, the hole in the world gets filled in. Nothing magical, of course; pure science. In this case, you haven't your eyeball to thank, but your brain. It sees that gap and doesn't understand, so it makes up the gap with its best guess as to what should be there. A best guess, a working theory, knitted into reality so finely that you never even notice.

Now, here's a question. If you *could* notice — if someone told you which exact part of the world around you was a mere illusion — could you focus your mind upon it without fear? Without shutting your eyes in terror, just to make the phantom vision go away?

Nardeth and Mrellin noticed.

They were Lightbringers, higher-dimensional events clad in flesh and blood; of *course* they would notice. Of course they noticed that the people around them, milling about from stall to stall, were no different from those lies your brain invents to make itself feel better about the unknown. They were an attempt to fill in a gap — hazy and under-specified. As Nardeth and Mrellin surveyed the bizarre marketplace before them, part of them *saw* the gap, the absence of reality; not, in their case, a blind spot in their own perception, but a genuine hole in the fabric of things.

They could feel it, a crawling sensation under their skin; the people were somehow less real than them. Like their stories — their entire lives — weren't quite decided until they were talked to; a video game rendering a new environment, the best-guess-gap stories loaded in.

There was one figure, though, who felt Real. Realer than Real — like an image superimposed over a slightly out-of-focus background, just enough to make you think the image on top is the one that's too sharp, rather than the background being too blurry. Whichever way round it *really* was, it was the image on top that caught Nardeth off guard; they tapped Mrellin's shoulder and pointed at the entrance to the marketplace.

"Look."

Mrellin was already turning, feeling something familiar, a breath of warm air…

"She's… what is she?"

The wind picked up, whistling through the woman and seeming to shift the air around her without touching her hair or clothes at all. It was impossible to see her face; a dull brown cloth, barely more than a rag, was wrapped firmly around her features. It was beyond doubt that there was something *off* about her; everything else around them was draped in brightly-coloured gauze, whipping around uncontrollably in the wind, but she was dull and stock-still. Her eyes were too far away to make out, but Nardeth was sure that she was staring right at them.

"How do you know?"

Mrellin, still entranced, watched as the woman brought out a necklace — no, not *brought it out*; it was as though she'd always been holding it.

"Know what?" she responded, dazed.

"That she's a 'she'."

Mrellin blinked, and the woman was gone. "I just… she feels… I feel like I know her, somehow."

Nardeth smirked. "There's that superior-psychic-sense thing again, huh? Come on, we need to keep moving if we want to find Zerlan before sundown. Who knows how long the days last here."

They started trudging on, one hand on their right hip as they moved. Mrellin looked up at the sky, trying to see how far the sun had moved since they arrived, assuming this little asteroid even had just the one, but —

"Nardeth?" she called out, but they were already too far ahead — she ran to catch up. "Nardy, hold on!"

They stopped. "Hmm? What is it?"

Mrellin blinked, then frowned. "Never mind. Let's find someone to ask about Zerlan — no need to rush, though, let's take it slow."

Concentrating, they shifted the molecules around them, creating a buffer between themselves and the wind. Mrellin displaced herself slightly, keeping herself just far enough out of the reach of the windy layer of reality that her hair stayed perfectly still, while Nardeth clumsily attempted to force the space between their skin and the air to grow just a little larger.

Neither thought to wear a windbreaker.

Thus protected from the elements, the Lightbringers, determined as ever, made their way into the strange market under a bright sunless sky. They barely noticed when the heavy gates swung shut behind them.

* * *

6. Boxes

Groggily, Zerlan sat up, rubbing zir eyes as ze grew accustomed to the gloom. Silence hung heavy in the air like the dust-motes, which were illuminated by a shaft of light from the hole caused — Zerlan assumed — by zir falling through the roof.

This was a simple deduction, and not one that made Zerlan particularly pleased, given that the primary piece of evidence in favour of that conclusion was the great ache along zir back. Ze took in zir surroundings: walls of laminated wood stretched on as far as zir eyes could see, lined with sturdy shelves that seemed to be absolutely crammed with cardboard boxes. Boxes on every surface, piled high and towering, wobbling, as if about to tumble over; boxes stuffed into too-small spaces and taking up the same space as more boxes, and then a few more on top. Boxes here, boxes there, boxes up the wazoo.

Zerlan stood, making his way over to the nearest shelf. Gingerly, he ran a bruised finger along the crack between the two halves of the box lid, reaching the tip of the finger underneath to lift up the lid. There could be *anything* inside. He supposed, until he saw what it was, that in a way *everything* was in the box, or rather, the *possibility* of everything… he could open it to find his friends — who he seemed to have misplaced — or the insignia of the Founders, or a hat from Beelox 12! Excited by the endless possibilities, he pulled back the lid and —

It wouldn't budge.

He pulled harder, yanking, tearing at the cardboard, but it was as if the box was painted onto the fabric of the warehouse; ordinary-looking cardboard, acting like it wasn't even there.

Zerlan snorted at the absurdity of the situation — it was only cardboard! He could *feel* it was only cardboard, he could *see* that it was only cardboard, he could *taste* that it was only cardboard, and yet, it didn't have the common decency to *behave* like it was cardboard! Testing, curious, ze tried to pick up the box.

It lifted easily.

Ze shook it; there was something inside, not rattling exactly, but certainly *shifting*.

Placing the box down on the floor beside his feet, he turned to the next stack, repeating his efforts, and — *huh*. The first box was back in its place as if nothing had happened. The layer of dust Zerlan had wiped from the top of the lid was intact. Zerlan rubbed the same dust off zir finger in wonder, and began to wander down the aisles in search of something *different*.

* * *

7. Mrellin and Nardeth Investigate

Derochtian petals were known for smelling uncomfortably like anything but what you would expect. Sometimes they smelled of toothpaste, or lavender, and sometimes of a rotting carcass. So, when Nardeth noticed the broad purple petals spilling out from a ceramic vase by the door and smelled only a heavy floral musk, they knew something was wrong. It was too… easy. Too boring. That wasn't what derochtians were *supposed* to be like.

They turned away from the flowers to watch something that made sense — Mrellin, still talking to the stallholder. Her back was to Nardeth, pink hair shifting as she moved animatedly — she'd told Nardeth about *tactics* and *negotiation* in a way that made them sound more like casual tricks than interrogation. They were mesmerised as she laughed; it was a hearty sound, and it filled the space like it belonged right there, right then, in that room, that air, that reason… she was *enchanting*. They wondered if she knew how wonderful she was, how much her presence could fill up a room.

She was moving her arm now, taking something out of the folds of her shirt. That shirt was *magic*, it must be; they wouldn't be surprised if she pulled a rabbit out of there one day. They wanted to clap and holler when she pulled out even something as small as the paperclip she was retrieving for the stallholder.

She held it out for them to examine; their clothes were light and airy for the heat, but covered almost every inch of skin, providing protection from the sun. Most of the stallholders wore some variation on the outfit, though a few wore sleeveless garments, or shirts that hung open, revealing their chest.

Nardeth had been raised to cover as much skin as possible; it was polite, they'd been told, and would help them get taken seriously. Not that anyone took them seriously, no matter what they wore.

Mrellin turned back to Nardeth and motioned for them to leave the shop. They stepped out from under the awning together, and Nardeth moved in close.

"Is it just me, or, is there something not quite right about all this?" They asked, their voice soft but urgent.

Mrellin shrugged. "I feel like there's a lot out of place here — we crashed only half an hour or so's walk away, and yet no-one heard or saw us. They won't accept money — that trader was asking for an 'oddity' in exchange for a pair of candlesticks. I didn't even really want them — I don't know why I bothered offering anything," she said, waving the newly-purchased candlesticks in their direction. "And, well…"

"This whole place is suddenly empty, apart from us and the traders?" Mrellin cocked her head in agreement, then looked up at the sky.

"It's getting dark awfully fast."

Nardeth squinted upwards. "I don't think the sun's going down — come to think of it, I'm not sure I even saw a sun at all. But, the sky was clear before…"

Mrellin's voice grew low and serious. "It must be the storm. It knocked us here in the first place, and now…"

"We really, really need to get out of here."

* * *

8. Warehouse of No Return

Nothing was out of place.

Everything was exactly as it should be, if you could count such a mess as a natural order — it was like the boxes had always been there, or perhaps had grown in place, pushing out from the linoleum floor as roots, crowding one

another and fighting for space. Although it was hard to imagine anything had ever moved in this warehouse — either the boxes being placed there, or moving into place, seemed entirely out of the question. There was some quality, some sort of settled-ness about the room that threw Zerlan off. Like ze wasn't meant to be there — like *no one* was ever meant to see this place. It wasn't the air exactly, or even the contents of the aisles — more like the essence of the building. It's soul. Everything had some sort of *feeling* to it, some sort of *liveliness*, even if it wasn't recent, but this place… there was no intelligence, or any life at all. It was just *there*. Static.

Zerlan was an energetic person. He never sat still, never stopped moving… there was nowhere that could possibly have made him feel more out-of-place than wherever he was right now. It was just *wrong*; he knew he must stick out like a sore thumb, and not in a pleasant sort of confident, rebellious way like he did back home. He couldn't stand it.

Suddenly, he burst into a run, desperate to feel something, *anything* but the silence. He screamed, but the boxes muffled the sound, and he stopped giddily. Nothing changed. Nothing was disturbed, nothing out of place — except, of course, for zir.

Ze turned to take in the aisle ze'd found zirself in — another carbon-copy of all the others, the boxes the same higgledy-piggledy mess as everything else, the same brown with a splash of — wait. There was no splash anywhere else but here, yes! There, right in front of Zerlan, was a yellow handle. Ze leaned down and lifted it eagerly; a square handle with a grip along the bottom side, and a longer rectangular frame above the handle, with the far side formed by a jagged-toothed blade. Finally, something that could move! Greedily, Zerlan picked it up and swung it with all zir might at the nearest box, zir arm coming down with a tremendous force, all that pent-up energy smothered by the uncomfortable claustrophobia of the too-still room finally unleashed…

Until something caught zir arm.

* * *

9. The Sandwich Conundrum

Nardeth perched on a conveniently-located wall as Mrellin moved from stall to stall, desperate for any information that could lead her to Zerlan, or to her ship. She parted gauzy fabric curtains to colourful interiors with shopkeepers who never said a word until she spoke to them, always running quickly into the next stall. Outside, the storm was growing worse, and she couldn't bear to stay underneath it for long. There was something about the storm that made her uneasy; like it was a bird of prey, circling in on her until she couldn't fend it off any longer.

She pushed into a stall with green velvet hangings, reaching into her top to bring out a marble, offering it to a grim man with sallow cheeks and sunken eyes. His skin was weather-beaten and his hands were calloused.

"Hi, I was wondering if you noticed the wooden cabin that crashed around here?"

She was met with a blank stare.

"Okay, right. Well, I'm looking for my friend, and I think he might have ended up somewhere around here… about this tall," she held her hand somewhere to the right of her nose, "brown hair, loads of freckles?"

She continued to stare at the man. He blinked, then reached out his hand, taking the marble. Mrellin's breath caught expectantly; was he taking payment for some information he was prepared to offer? But no; he placed, in her hand, a small snowglobe. She groaned in frustration, storming out of the shop.

By the time she returned to Nardeth, she'd visited three more shops, and was holding a heavy paperback, the back cover bent back on itself. The front had an image of a small figure that resembled a cactus standing next to a large bird; Mrellin thrust it into Nardeth's arms and sat down beside them, crossing her arms impatiently.

"Sandwich?"

They held out half of an elongated bread roll, stuffed with some kind of meat, various leaves sticking out from the edges. She wondered how many of

those leaves were actually edible — she was almost certain she recognised laurel, which was neither native to the galaxy they'd been in when the Ship had been blown off course, nor safe to eat — but took the food anyway.

"Where did you get a sandwich out here? I haven't seen anywhere selling food." She turned to her crewmate, and narrowed her eyes. "And by the way, what happened to your earring? I could've sworn you had on a set this morning, not just the one."

Nardeth's right ear was now bare, while their left still sported a small gold hoop, about the width of their thumb nail. They mumbled something unintelligible as they chewed their half of the sandwich, then swallowed and repeated:

"Sorry. Was saying — the two are very much connected."

Mrellin flopped backwards with a groan. She seemed to be doing that a lot today — usually she had better composure, but everything about this place was throwing off her ability to remain, at least on the surface, calm and unaffected.

"You swapped your earring… for that."

She took in a deep breath, still staring up at the maudlin sky. Skies shouldn't be *maudlin*, she thought grumpily. Being annoyed didn't get her anywhere, but she did it anyway, just for the sake of things. It *felt* like the only appropriate reaction someone could have to this place, and yet there was Nardeth, eating that blasted sandwich like nothing was wrong… but the sky was *feeling things*, she was sure of it, and that just wasn't very proper, not very sky-like at all, and she was *cross*. Skies shouldn't emote, or whisper… *whisper*…

Look.

She found herself, as if by instinct, like she'd heard her name called or been tapped on the shoulder, turning her head to the left.

* * *

10. Sailor Girl

Seas of possibility swirled beneath her eyes as she reached out an arm to rouse her; alerted to a presence, the captain saw through, lifted the veil and saw her, right there, and her hand went to her chest and mirrored and felt, really felt, and there was something there, hanging heavy at the base of her collar like a rope, something pulling her, something legendary…

She sang.

Sailor girl, sailor girl, sent away to sea

Sailor girl, sailor girl, falls to the waves

So lost. So alone.

Glimmer under the waves.

Sailor girl, sailor girl, reached out a hand.

Sailor girl, sailor girl, it sank too fast

Dive deep down, sailor girl sailor girl, breathe in the sea.

You are one with the ocean, grasp the Eye.

Sailor girl, sailor girl, guided back home.

Her lips didn't move.

* * *

11. A Lightbringer and zir Forklift

The frame was black, as were the wheels, but the body was as yellow as the hacksaw in Zerlan's hand. In all the commotion, ze'd forgotten ze was holding it, though instinctively brought the tool against the giant metal claw the creature before zir. Well, not exactly a *creature* — the thing was a forklift, but it had headlights installed as if it were a car, and the light seemed to carry some intelligence usually only carried in the eyes.

"Explain yourself," it rattled out mechanically, and Zerlan marvelled at the hodgepodge of features welded onto the robot seemingly at random. He was so busy staring in wonder that he almost forgot to reply.

"I'm kind of lost — just trying to find my friends. Have you seen anyone else around here?"

"That's not an explanation!"

"Yes it is! I found myself here and I'm still here because I'm lost! I'd give you more information but, well, that's all there is!"

"You were attacking the merchandise. This is not accounted for in your 'explanation'!"

Zerlan hadn't met a sarcastic robot before — not that robots were a common sight back home; there was a certain sentiment among the Lightbringers of the Morning Star that they were above that sort of mundane, straightforward technology — and the artificial voice was almost monotone, but even so, he was *certain* he could hear quotation marks around the last word.

"I was just curious about what was in the boxes. Hey, what *is* in the boxes? Can you tell me?"

Suddenly, the robot seemed to draw itself up, the claw it used to catch Zerlan's hand before he could do any damage slamming up to attention.

"I am the Droid for Intervention and Prevention of Object Damage, or D.I.P.O.D.. I am sent through rifts and tears in the Universe to collect items from potentially temporary sites, and store them in a space collecting the items, which only I can access. I am able to track movement in this space and teleport to where I am needed, detecting damage to the storage units and identifying issues to be repaired by —"

D.I.P.O.D. stopped.

Zerlan leaned forward, frowning. "By who?"

D.I.P.O.D. considered. "I don't know. I don't think my memory bank is big enough to remember."

Zerlan tutted. All those useless features, and yet something that would actually make the robot more efficient was completely overlooked… poor workmanship. Poor robot.

"Well, what *can* you remember? Who sent you? A company, perhaps?"

"I don't… I can't tell you, even if I could remember."

"Well, when were you last serviced? You're a bit, uh, dusty."

"I don't remember."

"Not even when you last were recalled for repairs? What about the last time you interacted with a person — the last time your database was checked, anything?"

"I don't remember!"

"Alright! That's okay — there's a lot I don't remember, myself. I'm always forgetting things, like where I left my tools, or when I put food into the oven. Drives my crewmates nuts. You haven't seen my friends, have you?"

D.I.P.O.D. considered Zerlan for a moment, processing the question. The Lightbringer hadn't expected the glum reply.

"I wish I had friends."

Zerlan blinked, then sat down beside D.I.P.O.D.. "Maybe I could be your friend?"

"That's not how I'm supposed to operate — I am not *built* to have friends."

Zerlan sighed. "Sometimes I don't think I am, either."

He looked around the warehouse — untouched for years, maybe decades. It was impossible to tell. He turned back to the robot, just as neglected as its home, and added:

"But — you know something? I'm not sure anything around here is operating how it's supposed to."

* * *

12. The Game's Afoot

Nardeth rubbed their neck uncomfortably. "Mrell, are you sure this is the right way?" Their captain was frantic, weaving between stalls and racing along the market like she was trying to catch a ghost. "I know you said you saw something, but —"

Mrellin shook her head, breathing heavily. "Not saw. Heard. Just, trust me, I know what we need."

Nardeth didn't exactly look comforted, but despite their concerns, they followed her lead. "Right, you're *hearing things*… and, while voices only you can hear are *definitely* a trustworthy source… it's just, last time you tried to talk to the traders, you ended up with a book. Even if it is about a storm, I'm not sure it's that helpful, since it's specifically a *snow* storm and I really don't see any snow — oomph!"

They stumbled backwards as Mrellin grabbed the book and ran into the nearest stall, knocking past the bowl of eyeballs and the table that was bubbling slightly to thump the book down in front of a trader. The man wore a hat that stretched on forever, and spoke of a bird, some ominous creature that portented doom, but Mrellin didn't pay him any mind. On her way out, the curtain seemed to have been replaced by a door, and the door had a mouth and began to speak —

"*Answer my riddle or —"*

She didn't hear the rest, barging right through and back to Nardeth. She handed them a strange, elongated object that was filled with different coloured liquids.

"Uh, I don't think this is the kind of lamp that grants wishes."

Mrellin looked giddy, her hair mussed and her arms flying as she spoke.

"Of course it's not a snowstorm," she babbled, entirely ignoring Nardeth's comment about the lamp — "it's a *reality* storm. It was so difficult before because I didn't really know what I was looking for, but now, I know what we need. I just have to find it!"

"Find *what*?"

"There's a light," replied Mrellin, as if that said it all — though a moment later, she added: "And the light is trapped. inside something so small; so unassuming. And —"

"And?"

Mrellin grinned. "And we just have to keep trading things until we find it!"

Nardeth wasn't reassured. They peered through what was once again just an ordinary curtain, no riddle-me-this door qualities whatsoever about it, to look at the bowl of eyeballs.

"Okay… something unassuming… look, I just don't understand how this will lead us to Zerlan."

Mrellin grabbed their arm. "The light will guide our way home, I just know it, and my crew is my home, so… *there*!" she shouted abruptly, snatching back the lava lamp and hurrying into a stall a little further along the curve of the market.

A minute or so later, she came out with a gold watch.

"Not bad, considering we started with a marble and a paperclip. We'll have that guide in no time!"

Nardeth looked behind them — they couldn't see the stalls they'd been to only a few minutes ago, obscured as they were by the fog. There was something moving… the air was cold and grey and it was starting to close in. They looked back at Mrellin, who was grinning as she dashed ahead to the next promising stall, and they made to follow their captain.

* * *

13. Meditations

"Sometimes I just feel like they forget about me. I don't know why I always go so under the radar. It's not like I'm *trying* to go unnoticed — I'm a pretty lively person."

"That is not always appreciated," D.I.P.O.D. remarked, and Zerlan leaned back on its leather chair.

D.I.P.O.D. didn't exactly seem made to be operated from the inside, so why its creator had kept a chair as part of the design, Zerlan couldn't possibly imagine. Maybe it was just for company. A lot of the construct's features seemed pointless, except to make it more personable — an odd choice for a droid. Zerlan was getting the impression that its creator was a very odd person.

"I guess not. Back at Antredox Academy, everyone seemed to be trying to fit in, like there was some predetermined shape they were trying to slot inside. I never got that — I never *wanted* to understand. It's so boring, being like everyone else. Staying still… home never moves. Nothing ever happens there. Even when there's a war, or a coup, anyone who bothers to fight back goes on and on about restoring the status quo, and the ones who don't tell you at length how the new dictator is actually going to keep everything exactly the same. Which is supposed to be… reassuring?! *Urgh*!"

Zerlan sighed, and let a moment pass without speaking.

"Why *shouldn't* things change?" ze asked once ze'd collected zir thoughts. "I couldn't even keep still enough to stay. I just thought Mrellin and Nardeth would *understand* that, but all Nardeth wants to do is stay hidden, and Mrellin wants to keep everything on the Ship the same… I thought I'd found people who *got it*, but, maybe they're not like me at all. I just don't want them to see me as, I don't know, disposable? That's stupid. I'm stupid… I shouldn't say things like that. They're my friends."

"You said *we* could be friends." Most everything D.I.P.O.D. said, it said as a statement of fact, but once more Zerlan fancied he could discern some emotion behind the words, however impossible that was. Could robots be psychic? Could you read their minds without learning to code? "Does that mean you won't leave me behind?"

At that, Zerlan leapt to his feet. "Of *course* I won't! Hey, when the others come, I'll convince them to take you with us. You can help out around *Zadellin* with me! Then, well, we can be the odd ones out together."

The way D.I.P.O.D.'s claw creaked almost sounded like a sigh. "I've been the only one here for a very long time — I'm always the odd one out, as I'm the only one here. My creator used to talk to me. I think. I remember…" The claw creaked again. "I didn't think they would ever leave me."

Zerlan looked out at the warehouse. Not even the dust motes moved, but he was safe inside the droid. There was no doubt in his mind that D.I.P.O.D. had been left behind; its memory chip degraded with neglect, so it couldn't even remember its only friend. Being left behind would hurt worse, he thought, than feeling like a stranger among friends. Maybe it was better to be lonely than alone.

"I won't leave you. And we've always got my Ship — at least, if we can get out of here."

Zadellin would never leave me.

D.I.P.O.D. stirred, dashboard blinking to life with sudden inspiration.

"I have something to show you."

Zerlan put a hand on the dashboard, and the pair started moving, trundling along the warehouse floor, faster and faster… they sped by the aisles of copy-and-paste cardboard boxes, repeating over and over, endlessly filling the space, until D.I.P.O.D. slowed at somewhere that could, maybe, just be a little more real than the rest of the space, if only it had the decency to try. There was something about this stack of boxes, like the dust was a little unsettled, a little more used to being alive.

"BEEP BEEP BEEP," D.I.P.O.D. said as it lowered its claw and picked up the boxes.

Zerlan reached out a hand — these boxes were just as untouchable as the rest of the stacks. Just as out of reach. But for D.I.P.O.D., they were a little more real, as if its claw were a bridge between Zerlan's world and the World of Boxes; as if moving the stack was opening a door…

* * *

14. No Refunds

"*Argh*!!!" Nardeth screeched, stamping their foot against the dusty ground, then cursing themself for jogging their knee.

Closing their eyes, they reached back until they could feel the moment in their hands, and gave it a swift tug. They had never slammed their foot down. Logically, they should no longer be in pain. If they could do it right…

But there was still a twinge in their knee, and they found themself biting their lip to distract from the pain when they tested if it would take their weight. Exhaustion was winning, and they sunk onto the ground, no longer caring if their robe got dirty.

Mrellin, they called, but she was haggling with another trader. Wincing, they struggled back to their feet and hobbled over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Mrell, we're back where we started. The gates we came through are right over there. We can leave, go back to *Zadellin*, and maybe she can track Zerlan's location."

"Just a minute — I'm talking to this *fascinating* trader who — "

"Used to be a farmer, and was telling you how eligible her daughter is, in a transparent attempt to set you two up?"

Mrellin blinked. "Uh, yes, exactly. How did you…"

Nardeth shrugged. "It's easy if you know where to look. But, listen, I really think we should leave."

"Well, as *captain* — "

"Right. Okay."

They slipped back out the way they came, sinking down to the ground once more. They wanted Mrellin to notice they were upset. They wanted her to leave them alone. They wanted… they didn't know what they wanted. They were in pain and grubby and too tired to think.

Regardless of what they really did want, Mrellin joined them a few seconds later.

"Okay, I'm listening."

Nardeth turned away. "I'm sure it doesn't matter, or my *amazing captain* would have taken notice before now."

They knew they were being unhelpfully sulky, and maybe that was unfair — they weren't the only one panicking about losing Zerlan — but they didn't know what else to say.

"And as your *amazing captain*, I should be listening to my first mate. You said it's the same gate?" She turned to look at the metal structure. "Good observation. But it's closed… let's go see if we can get it open."

She stood, and walked several steps before realising that Nardeth wasn't following her. She turned back and looked them over, noticing the cautious way they were holding themself, the way they wouldn't quite meet her gaze…

"Oh. I should have realised… it's been a lot of walking. Well, not to worry, I shall go investigate. I'll be right back," she promised.

As she approached the gate, it occurred to her that this very spot was where the strange woman had first caught her attention, but she was nowhere to be seen. Mrellin reached the gate and pushed, gently at first, but then harder, soon yanking at it with all her might — the gate wouldn't budge. She could see no obvious footholds, and even if they could somehow get past the gate, the storm had swallowed the view of everything beyond — she wasn't sure if she'd even be able to make it to *Zadellin*. Frustrated, she stomped back towards Nardeth, but —

Candlesticks. The stall to her left, the first one she'd been to, had the *same* candlesticks that Mrellin had bought with her paperclip when they first entered the market.

"Hey!" She busted through the curtains, slamming her candlesticks on the table for the trader to examine. "I just bought those candlesticks off you a couple of hours ago, and here you are, with the same pair out on display!"

The trader crooked their neck to take in the sight of the raving customer, their smile serene as anything. "Well, I put out any stock I have. If I have doubles, then I must have put the second set out to replace the first. Nothing wrong with that." They sounded entirely reasonable, if slightly bemused at Mrellin's outrage.

"But they're the *exact same pair!* Look, they have the same scratch here on the right stick, just under the holder!"

In response, the stallholder simply tapped the '*No Refunds*' sign, smiling enigmatically.

"I don't — but how — you *have* to know *something* — fine!" she exclaimed, reaching for an item nearby. "How about I swap you… these candlestickers for this? That has to be a fair trade — this is just a piece of wood, and the candlesticks are solid pewter."

The stallholder reached out to take the candlesticks, running a finger up and down the pair. Finally, they responded:

"There's a scratch on the right stick."

"That was there when you sold them to me!" Mrellin wanted to scream.

"Ah, now, I can't very well have sold you something I still have, can I? That's against the rules." They pointed to the identical pair still in their possession. "Besides, I have some exactly like those already. No, I only deal in objects that are unique. You must have *something* suitable… something that ties you back to your roots, perhaps?"

They glanced pointedly at the part of Mrellin's shirt that looped around to form a makeshift pocket. Despite the shopkeeper's mind being inscrutably blank, she knew exactly what they wanted.

Nardeth was still on the ground, seemingly half asleep, when Mrellin returned. She wordlessly handed them a wooden walking staff, and held out a hand.

They took it.

She heaved them to their feet and began moving back through the stalls, trying to find one they hadn't been to out of the few they could still see. Nardeth followed her, leaning on the staff.

"How did you pay for this?" They asked, and she shrugged.

"Oh, you know, there's always something," she replied noncommittally, and Nardeth stopped her with a word, hurtling towards her through their mental connection —

Please.

She fidgeted uncomfortably for a few seconds, but she knew they wouldn't let it go until she told them.

"I knew someone," she started, "back home. We read a book together… I still had a copy. But it's fine, it was some Old Earth book, we can just pick up another one on our next trip to the early twenty-first century."

The wind was howling now, miserable and forlorn; a funeral hymn. As the crewmates watched, the stall Mrellin had come from disappeared, a tempest of dust and fog eating away at the awning.

You didn't have to. Ordinary speech couldn't be heard over such a racket; when the spoken word failed, they must resort to other methods of communication.

I wanted to. She didn't have to look them in the eye to know that she meant it.

As there was only one stall left standing completely untouched by the storm, it was obvious where they had to go. They huddled together against the punishing weather as they approached the purple-clothed structure. No matter how the winds buffeted Nardeth and Mrellin, the cloth stayed perfectly still, unaffected by the environment. Nardeth wondered how they'd never noticed the stall in their circuit of the market, while Mrellin simply smiled. There was something familiar about the purple, something that smelled of home… she had a good feeling about this one.

As the pair drew nearer they could see, hanging from the horizontal pole that made the top of a door frame-like structure at the front of the stall, a sign. And on that sign were words, the three most disheartening words Mrellin or Nardeth had ever seen:

"BACK IN FIVE."

* * *

15. Beautiful Things

This was not a silent place.

Before Zerlan stood a small nook crowded behind the unreality of an immovable box stack; a sentient, growling, shadowy kind of reality, one which could hold things. Things Zerlan could touch… Twinkling things, staring out of their haphazard piles, as if watching the robot and the Lightbringer survey the collection.

"This is…"

"They are all the things I find beautiful," D.I.P.O.D. told Zerlan, moving backwards to allow zir entry. "I have no protocol for what to do with the damaged things, the ones that won't go back into the boxes, so I bring them back here. That way, they are all together."

Zerlan reached out a hand, finger trailing admiringly along a shelf of battered circuits. "Everything that was left behind. At least they aren't alone… you're right, Dip, this is beautiful."

"I am not supposed to have this. Discarded robots are not supposed to find things beautiful. Could you use them to reach your friends?"

Zerlan nodded slowly, distracted, wrapped in amazement. "Yes, I daresay I can." Snapping back to zirself, ze chose zir next words carefully. "We'll find my *other* friends in no time!"

Huddling in as the storm raged louder outside, banging on the walls as a thousand hands tearing at the refuge, the strange pair began constructing a crude teleportation device. Zerlan's nimble fingers snapped up frequency modulators and transference controllers while D.I.P.O.D. recalibrated its

programming to search for the Ship based on Zerlan's description of her energy patterns. Very few of the parts were actually damaged beyond easy repair; it seemed that anything that fell out of the boxes was considered too far gone to be allowed back in.

Before long, Zerlan had conjured up a Rube Goldberg-esque jumble of wires and transmitters and receivers and modulators and other long words that sounded ridiculously complicated, when really all it amounted to was a way to use D.I.P.O.D.'s inbuilt teleport and navigation systems to latch onto *Zadellin* and take them both inside.

"Hopefully, when she recognises my handiwork, she'll let us in — her shields are very strong, you know," Zerlan said proudly. "If I wasn't involved, she'd be unlikely to let us in. Now, I've just got to wire the relay into your power source, and teleportation outside the warehouse will be possible!"

D.I.P.O.D. had not said anything in some time. "It is good," it rumbled, "that you have another machine who you know so well."

"And now that the transport is ready, you can meet her too! She can be a bit grumpy, but she's alright really, once she knows you." He hopped into the seat and turned on the updated navigation. "Right, I think I've got a lock on her. Ready?"

D.I.P.O.D. creaked. "There seems to be a problem."

* * *

16. Whispers in the Wind

"... so, I suppose that's why it meant so much to me," Mrellin finished. "It reminded me of them. A time when someone understood what I was going through, and was there for me through it all."

Nardeth nodded. The storm was fast closing in, but the stallholder still hadn't returned. Nardeth wasn't sure that they ever would, but talking with Mrellin helped. Made it easier not to think about the future; not when they could get lost in each other's pasts.

“I’m glad you had someone supporting you through that time,” they said. “School was hell. I wish I had someone like that… Honestly, I think my only constant was this stupid dream.”

Mrellin nodded. The words were coming through an increasingly intertwined mental link, but it felt easier to say them as well; even if the words couldn't reach their ears, they would creep into the recesses of their mind and be heard *somehow*. “The dream? The maze?”

“More like a labyrinth — I’ve never run into a dead end.”

They sat together for a while, heads together, wedged tight into the side of the stall. Their voices were whispers, drowned out by the loss, by the voracious whirl of a dying star, spewing out one last burst of energy to eat before it collapses in on itself. Real things should not have ended up there. Real things should not have made it onto the asteroid made of half-chewed memories of anything the storm had touched, but the living cannot help being swept away by the grasping hands of the almost-dead. What had they to do, when faced with annihilation, but share their stories?

Mrellin took Nardeth by the hand and led them deeper into her mind; beyond skimming, beyond picking out the facts that float like buoys, providing something for passing ideas to cling onto — she showed them her story. Lost love who made her feel seen for the first time and satin sheets drenched in blood; hushed voices behind closed doors. Secrets she wasn’t trusted with, but that she knew anyway. And in kind, Nardeth melded their mind to hers; a last keening cry of solidarity before nightfall. Before she was lost too, and they would be left alone. They let her feel the space behind their eyes; the divots and warped edges and the fear and the self-loathing and the certainty that they’d never make it out alive. There was nowhere to go from here. Nothing ever after.

They held each other close and waited in the warmth of one another’s bodies for the storm to pass them by. It might have been six hours. It might have been six minutes. It might have been exactly fifty-three days of the storm before Nardeth felt Mrellin start to slip away; each lash of the air was a layer of skin stolen and ripped out of reality. They started shaking; she was

still holding them tight. They looked up at the sign. The piece of card decreed a very simple rule: wait.

Nardeth was tired of following the rules.

"No!" they yelled, and the word was lost to the howling wind but that did not mean it wasn't there, and they hauled whatever they could still feel of Mrellin in through the curtain. The fabric looped and twisted, caught in the storm, finally allowed entry to the only stall in the market that wasn't made of something it had already eaten.

"I demand to speak to…" they trailed off.

Before them stood no tables laden with wares, only a woman. She had stones for eyes and was wrapped in bright purple rags. She had seen the Storm create this world and she had given herself over to it; she had become the Storm, their guide, a beacon to lead their way home. Around her neck hung a simple cord with a metal pendant; two curled claws, and, caged inside, what appeared to be a gemstone. The stone was pale and transparent and may have been glass, smoothed by rough waters into a three-pointed, rounded little thing that stuck out. Swept up from storage of foreign things, it was not a creation of the Storm.

The Woman reached out a hand, pointing at Mrellin.

Cotton and dust flickered away to show a merchant, royal purple robes and tall formal headdress screaming *authority*. They were still pointing. They opened their mouth and the storm flew out —

"A confession…" they breathed.

Nardeth stared them down. They could feel Mrellin stirring in their arms, still enough of her there to understand what was happening.

"We're not giving anything else to you! The storm, the darkness, the rules… I've given everything I have, and it's still not enough! We deserve to get something back."

They reached out and snatched the necklace from around the merchant's neck, not stopping to watch as the storm ripped through the canvas behind

them. *We have the right to stand together.* Nardeth carefully fastened the stone around Mrellin's neck, brushing the hair from around her face. She leant on them as she struggled to her feet. The merchant was being torn apart, piece by piece, layer by layer, and all Mrellin could feel was a pounding in her head, a bright light, growing and obscuring the stall…

She sees the Woman flicker one last time before she's swallowed with everything else. Nardeth hugs her close, and the light grows brighter as they hold her hand…

* * *

17. Farewell to a Friend

"I don't understand." Zerlan was shaking his head; he sounded so loud, against the silence of the warehouse. "You were talking about coming with me… if you knew… I just don't understand."

The droid's dash flickered; Zerlan had almost forgotten how desperate its state was in all the excitement. But the truth was there, right there on the dash he had spent an hour modifying — D.I.P.O.D. was running out of power.

"It will take everything I have to transport you to your ship's location. My battery has been dying for quite some time."

Zerlan was still shaking zir head. "If you'd just been serviced, if someone had paid a little more attention, your battery never would have degraded to this point. It isn't right. It isn't fair!"

D.I.P.O.D.'s voice buzzed and hissed with impossible emotion. "I wish I could come with you. It was good, I think, to know you while I could, but it is my time. You must go."

"I can't leave you! I promised!" The doors clicked shut — Zerlan yanked on the handles, but it was no use. "No, let me out! We have to find another way!"

"Goodbye, my friend."

The teleport flickered to life as Zerlan banged on the doors from the inside; a bright light crept across zir vision. Ze thought ze saw the droid's headlights flickering as ze left the warehouse behind.

A flash of purple and stone eyes melting into nothing sped across zir vision as ze hurtled to a stop just outside a market stall; someone familiar, they sensed, madly. Someone who was… always looking out for zir.

"Of course it's you," ze whispered, and pushed zir way into the Zadellin. "Nardeth, Mrellin?" Ze called, then moved through the corridor into the control room. "Well, I guess it's just you and me, Zads. Come on, let's find our crew."

* * *

18. Things - Part Two

Storms sweep things up, storms knock things out of place. It's in their nature. The nature of a Ship, on the other hand, is to traverse, to navigate, to circumscribe. Thus, it was only to be expected that when a Space-Time Ship found Herself hurled by the storming winds into that still-reassembling Pile of Stuff that was quickly growing into Somewhere where Things were Sold — when that Ship found that She couldn't grab ahold of this not-quite-a-place as She would the Turning, that She couldn't straighten it out into words and diagrams — then, put in crudely human terms, She got very, very cross.

Anger spurred action. If reality wouldn't behave by itself, She would simply have to reach into the chaos and spin something useful out of all the Stuff; yes, that was the solution. She'd make something She could see through. Something She could *talk* through, or at the very least, *whisper*.

The nonsense was loud, but she was louder. The winds were turning, cyclones of broken moments; but before it knew what hit it, a swirling tendril found itself twisting and resetting, resetting into Something — Something that looked a little bit like Her. Not the best likeness, from most dimensions, but it would have to do.

The Something settled upon a pile of rocks, spinning existence out of the nothing, and emerged as a woman, dressed in dirt-brown rags. She had stones for eyes and a hand stretched out towards the horizon; her finger followed the landscape as it changed to encompass new structures, quickly populated with a bustling herd of people. She took it in; she made sure she understood, because her occupants wouldn't, and they'd need all the help they could get. The people outside were not like her; they were best-guesses of a reality warped by the storm. She *was* the storm, as the Ship understood it.

She continued turning, never moving her feet, never changing pace, her finger following as something whirred across the sky. A frantic pattern of smoke billowed out as a much more definite Something hurtled down towards the suddenly very real ground. At first, it seemed to be a cabin; in a blink it was a bird, then a plane, but all three kept tumbling down, entirely failing to mollify gravity, and with a few bounces off newly-old trees, it finally hit the ground, juddering to a standstill.

By then, the Woman, who had been leagues away, stood at the entrance to a sprawling market. At the moment of impact, she buckled, bruises blossoming across her torso — but rectified her footing almost instantly. She didn't utter a sound.

Nothing broken. Nothing lost.

Sighing, she shook her head as two figures emerged from something that *had been* a Boeing 787, only to revert, defeated, to the appearance of a small log cabin. The Woman's lip curled ever so slightly at the sight.

The two figures climbed out of the cabin which, in all the commotion, had somehow ended up with its door on the roof, looking around to get their bearings. A pale hand at a right-angle to their forehead to protect from the glaring sunlight, one of them pointed another hand at the distant structures, and the pair set off.

The woman blinked and, just as suddenly as she had first appeared, she was waiting to meet them.

* * *

19. Conclusions

People don't like admitting their blind spots, because it's what makes them vulnerable — it's how Things get in. Things they can't quite understand.

But vulnerability doesn't have to be a bad thing. When you open your heart to others, they might just surprise you. As Mrellin clutched the stone to her chest, she felt something, humming through her — a kind of power. A connection. The light was a star, and the star was guiding her home…

* * *

20. Reunions

"They have to be somewhere!" Zerlan cried, despairing. The scanners weren't showing his crewmates' location. In fact, they were showing nothing whatsoever. "Please, come on, we have to find them — you have to get them back!"

But still, *Zadellin* was silent.

Just then, a commotion at the door —

— Zerlan turned to see Nardeth and Mrellin walk in, exhausted but alive.

"Oh thank Urizen — what *happened* to you two?"

"Right back at you," Nardeth responded, dropping a slim wooden staff and collapsing into the closest chair. "You almost look worse off than us."

"No time for explanations; we've got a storm to outrun," Mrellin reminded them sternly, swinging into the captain's chair and placing her hands on the controls. "Let's go."

21. Escaping the Storm

Escaping the Storm was easy, now that they had the Ship back — a simple fluctuation in reality was no match for a timeship of the Morning Star. Zerlan hovered over the scanners, frowning — none of them had been able to detect the asteroid they had just departed, let alone any sign of a storm like the one that had just nearly eaten them. Mrellin dangled her necklace over the

material interpreters, but it simply read as 'nothing'. She shook her head, then fastened it back around her neck — somehow, she felt better with it on.

Recognising that they should probably do *something*, Nardeth approached Zerlan, placing a hand gently on zir shoulder. They didn't know what to say, so they said nothing at all. After a moment, Zerlan leaned into their touch.

"Where should I set the coordinates to?" Zerlan asked.

"Well, Mrellin and I were talking, and we've got some ideas — obviously the most important part is that we keep moving, to make us harder to find, but that doesn't mean we can't move somewhere interesting."

"We've mapped out a few places," Mrellin added. "In the end, we figured we needed to get to somewhere with advanced space travel first, to stock up on some supplies, so we thought we'd head to Andromeda, 71st century — the Great Market of — "

"Oh, please, not another market!" Nardeth protested, and Mrellin giggled.

Zerlan watched them both carefully.

"You've… already talked about it. Right."

Ze stepped out from under Nardeth's hand — suddenly, it felt more like a source of claustrophobia than of comfort.

"Where are you going?" Mrellin called as ze walked out of the control room down the corridor.

"Going to spend some time with *Zadellin*," ze replied without turning to look back. *Somewhere I know I'm not alone.*

* * *

22. Meanwhile

"And that hack lost the trace! Can you *believe* the level of incompetence I'm trapped with, here?"

Draven had been ranting to some fellow Interrogator over the comms pad for over fifteen minutes. For a species so closely linked with time, Correhnon

was always surprised at how much of it Lightbringers liked to waste. One eye to the screens, ko was just starting to think about heading to bed when something caught kos attention — just as suddenly as it had disappeared, the energy from a timeship was back on the radar.

Ko turned to tell Draven the news. They'd have to follow up on any energy readings that indicated potential renegade activity, staying in the cramped patrol ship for days, maybe even weeks until they'd either exhausted the lead or could bring the blackguards in… weeks, with…

"What? Do you have something to say? How about an apology for losing our lead?"

Correhnon switched off the screen. "No, nothing. I'm off — see you in the morning."

Draven rolled his eyes as Correhnon brushed past him, hiding a smile.